

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

The theme for this morning's sermon is "What kind of Church" but before we consider this in more depth, I would just like to make sure that we all understand what we mean by the word Church. We need to be very clear about our definitions here because – over the centuries – many Biblical words have had their meanings altered and changed. The Bible uses the word "Church." But what is the church?

That's right - WE ARE, you and me. But over the years, the word "Church" has come to mean the buildings we meet in. For example someone will say "I'm going to church" meaning the church building.

Listen to the discerning words of the evangelist John Havlik: "The church is never a place, but always a people; never a fold but always a flock; never a sacred building but always a believing assembly. The church is you who pray, not where you pray. A structure of brick or marble can no more be the church than your clothes of serge or satin can be you."

A structure of brick or marble can no more be what a Church is than the clothing we wear would be who we are. In short... Jesus didn't die for a building. He died for YOU. And He died for ME. He died for people. And the people who accept His forgiveness on His terms make up... the church.

So now that we are all agreed that the church is a community of people, what kind of church do we want to show to the world as we go about our daily lives with our families, in our places of work and in our local communities? If we want to be authentic in our Christian faith then I would like to suggest that we would want to be:

- Jesus focussed
- Relational
- Generous

You might think that it is just a little obvious to say we should be Jesus focussed but I would like to take a little time to think about why this is so important; and here our reading from Colossians will be helpful. First of all Paul tells us in verse 15 that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. Here he is using a word and a picture which would evoke all kinds of memories in the minds of those who heard it. The Greek word is eikon, and image is the correct translation. It can

be a representation; but a representation, if it is perfect enough, can become a manifestation. When Paul uses this word, he is saying that Jesus is the perfect manifestation of God. To see what God is like, we must look at Jesus. He perfectly represents God to us in a form that we can see and know and understand. So we need to be Jesus focussed if we are to know God more intimately.

Secondly, Paul reminds us of the creation story which tells of the culminating act of creation. In Genesis 1 verses 26 and 27 we read, "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, ... So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them;'" Man was made to be nothing less than the eikon of God, for the word in the Genesis story is the same as that used in Colossians. By using this word of Jesus, Paul is in effect saying, "Look at Jesus. He shows you not only what God is; he also shows you what you were meant to be." Jesus is not only the perfect manifestation of God but also the perfect manifestation of us, you and me. So we need to be Jesus focussed if we are to grow in the image of God, trying however imperfectly day by day to become more Christ like.

Paul sets out in verse 18 another important reason for us to be Jesus focussed, "He is the head of the body, the church;". The Church, that is you and me, is the body of Christ; the organism through which he acts. Jesus is the guiding spirit; it is at his bidding that we must live and move. As Church without him we are unable to think the truth, we are unable to act correctly, we are unable to find our direction. As we sing the words of our closing hymn today, please think carefully of what you are singing.

"The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord; she is his new creation, by water and the word; from heav'n he came and sought her to be his holy bride, with his own blood he bought her, and for her life he died."

God's ultimate goal for us is to make us like Christ. As we become more like him, we discover our true selves, the persons we were created to be. How do we become like Christ? We can do this by reading and reflecting on the scriptures, by spending time in prayer, by listening to God for his guidance in our lives and the life of the church, by encouraging one another, by following Jesus example as we live out our daily lives and doing his work in the world. As we do this, we are building and strengthening our relationship with the Christ, which brings us to the second attribute – a relational church.

We know from the doctrine of the Trinity that relationship is at the very heart of God's nature. It is this relationship of love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit which helps us to understand that we are relational beings; we are not complete in ourselves, but only in our relatedness to God, to one another and to his creation. One of the ways which we build that relationship is as we join together in the Eucharist. As we gather week by week and partake of the Eucharist, not only are we made one with God but we are united with each other in the fellowship of the meal. This is a "multidimensional sharing"; a vertical dimension where we as individuals share in relationship with God and a horizontal dimension where we share in relationship with one another. Through Jesus Christ, his body and his blood, we share in God's love for humanity and - having received this unconditional love, we are expected to share that same love with each other.

When we share in the Eucharist, we are not just sharing with one another where we are, but we are sharing with all those throughout the world who come to the Lord's table. This means that as we enjoy God's gifts to us, we should be working to overcome the injustice that means so many people do not even have the basic necessities to sustain life. After all the Eucharist ends by sending us out into the world "to love and serve the Lord" - what we have received is meant to be shared and we can only share if we are building relationships in the communities where we live and work.

With the metaphor of the vine in John 15 verses 1-12, Jesus underscores his close relationship with the disciples and their absolute dependence on him for life and growth. And so it is with us, it is only by staying close to Jesus, like a branch attached to a vine, will we be in a right relationship with him which will enable us to produce fruit in our lives. Jesus emphasises the multidimensional relationship we spoke of earlier when he says in verse 9 "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.", and in verse 12 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.' So love flows from the Father, through the Son to us and through us to those around us.

From that love also flows the final attribute that I want us to think about – being a generous church. We know that God's generosity to us knows no bounds for he loves us so much that he sent his only son to die on the cross so that we could be reconciled to him – be brought back into a right relationship with him. Because God has showered us with his blessings, we should give generously of our time, our love and our possessions. 1 Chronicles 29 verse 14 reminds us that

“all things come from you, and of your own have we given you” - all things come from God, so all that we have is God’s gift to us. When Jesus sent out the disciples In Matthew 10 verse 8 saying,

“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment.”

He gave the disciples a principle to guide their actions as they ministered to others – “Give as freely as you have received”. Surely as individuals and as a church community generosity has to be the attitude that grows out of being Jesus focussed and relational? How then will we be identified as a generous community? We can ensure that we use the gifts that God has given us to serve him by serving others. We can think carefully about the financial resources we have been given and how these might be used in God’s service. We can be generous with our hospitality – how often do we think of inviting someone who might be lonely for a meal? As a church community we can think carefully about our attitude to charitable giving, remembering Jesus’ command to the disciples – “Give as freely as you have received”.

As I draw to a close I would like us to think of another kind of generosity – a generosity of spirit that stems from the love that we have experienced in Christ. A generosity of spirit that deals kindly with one another when we do not always agree. A generosity of spirit that is able to see the other’s point of view, without feeling threatened. A generosity of spirit that values each person for who they are and not who we would like them to be.

As we go from here today, let us pray that these new congregations will continue to grow to be Jesus focussed, relational and generous. In Jesus name. Amen.